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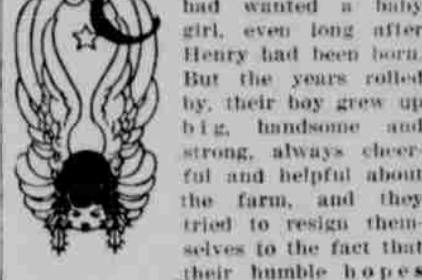
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### The Old Folks' Christmas Present

By DELYSLE FERREE CASS

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THE old folks always had wanted a baby girl, even long after Henry had been born. But the years rolled by, their boy grew up big, handsome and strong, always cheerful and helpful about the farm, and they tried to resign themselves to the fact that their humble hopes never would be satisfied. Old John Barker never referred to them, but every once in a while his wife would catch herself brooding, misty-eyed, of the sure day when young Henry would marry and leave them alone on the big farm for which there was no other heir.

Her sole comfort in the thought was that he would undoubtedly marry one of the honest buxom daughters of neighboring farmers, who would be content with country life and not expect to take him too far away from them in their old age.

Then came the great war, and Henry went overseas with his regiment as old most of the other true



Accustomed to the Wicked Frivolities of Paris.

American boys. The old folks parted from him courageously—old John with a stern grip of calloused, toll-worn hands, and Ma Barker with tears steadfastly hidden behind her faded, loving eyes. He was their all and they gave him.

In the anxious months that followed the old folks' life held the same hard routine as ever on the farm. Old John drove to town oftener than usual—sometimes even twice a week—to see if any letters had come from mysterious, sinister places in France, and as and mother would pore over the few that did arrive in the proud knowledge that their Henry was a "good" boy and was doing his duty. They prayed each night that the Lord would keep him safe to come back to them and to keep him from temptation while away from their care.

Then one day, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, came a terrible letter from France, which said: "I have found the sweetest little girl in all the world, and I'm bringing her home with me as a Christmas present to you. The regiment is now at Brest for embarkation and will surely be home for the holidays. . . . She is awfully pretty; thick hair, big eyes and always wanting to be kissed. Her name is Angelique. . . . Of course she can't speak anything but French, but, dear mother and dad, I just know that you'll soon learn to love her as much as I do."

The old folks were stricken with consternation. Their Henry bringing home a French girl—a foreigner who wouldn't understand their simple, old-fashioned ways, and to whom they never could reconcile themselves. Such a one—accustomed to the wicked frivolities of Paris—never would fit in on the farm, however modest or "nice" she might be. More likely she would despise it, and then, and take their boy away to live in some big city—leave them lonely in the old age that was now upon them.

The old folks bowed their grayed heads beneath the blow, nearly broken, although they tried bravely to conceal their most harrowing doubts from each other.

"Maybe she won't expect to wear silk underwear all the time and will be willing to help you wipe the dishes, evenings, mother," old John clumsily tried to console his wife as they sat alone in the farmhouse kitchen one night after chow was done. "And maybe, after all, she won't want to smoke cigarettes before people when she finds out American girls around here don't do that sort of thing."

Ma Barker shook her head sadly. "I'd do anything almost to make our boy happy, pa," she said, while the tears gathered in her faded eyes. "We must do our best not to let him notice how disappointed we are. Only I'm afraid she'll never be content here on the farm with us."

Ma Barker went about preparations for the big Christmas dinner with tearful premonitions, heavy hearted. She was nervous, wanted to sit down and cry, but felt she had to keep up, before pa, for Henry's sake, if not-

ing else. She knew of old, exacting all the good things that her boy liked for the Christmas dinner—juicy black fruit cake, steaming plum pudding, odoriferous brown-roasted turkey, and but oh! she didn't know what to prepare for her—couldn't get any frog legs if she had wanted to. And the geography said that frog legs were a favorite French dainty.

Oh, whatever would the minister say? . . . yes, and Sally Howarth, too, when they heard about—about "Angelique!" Sally had been "sweet" on Henry, and poor old Ma Barker had hoped—

But, ah, well! She mustn't let her dear boy know! He and his Angelique would be there tomorrow.

Christmas eve the old folks decorated the house with fir boughs, holly and strings of colored popcorn. They even trimmed a tree as they had done for Henry ever since he had been a little boy. Ma Barker thought, with a rising lump in her throat, that maybe the French girl would look on it all as silly; would curl her lip at their homely endeavors, but . . .

Christmas morning Jed, the hired man, drove off in the sleigh to meet their boy and his bride at the station in town. The odor of savory good things on the kitchen stove permeated the whole farmhouse, and the big open fire in the dining room crackled in comfortable contrast to the sparkling cold of the snow outside. Ma Barker bustled about, sadly setting the table with her best dishes. She caught old John stealthily coming up the basement stairs with a dusty denim John.

"Why, Pa Barker!" she exclaimed. "What's that you've got there? I do believe it's that cider that fermented so as we couldn't use it?"

"Yes, 'tis," admitted old John pretty shamefacedly, and shuffling his feet to hide his embarrassment. "But you see, I . . . I thought that maybe as Henry's girl is a French woman she'd rather like hard cider, seeing as we haven't any light wines nor champagne for her to drink."

A few minutes later they heard the sleighbells jingling, the snort of the horses and the crunch of runners on the snow in front of the house. Instantly the old folks forgot the dread that had been overshadowing them since the letter came. Ma Barker, with trembling fingers undid her apron, smoothed her hair "so that Henry's girl would see her looking right," and rushed out of doors. Old John followed more decorously and stiffly, for his rheumatism had been troubling him more than ever lately, making work harder for him about the farm. Yes, he certainly was going to miss Henry's help, when—

"My boy! my boy!" cried ma as she threw herself into the extended arms of the sturdy young soldier in khaki as he leaped out of the sleigh behind the broadly-grinning Jed. They clung ecstatically together for a few minutes until old John forced them apart to pump his hand up and down and mutter something about the bright sun on the snow making his eyes water.

And then, after the first exuberant greetings were over with, Henry laughingly disengaged himself and cried at them:

"And now let me introduce Angelique to you, people. And I want you



Angelique Was a Four-Year-Old Baby Girl.

to feel that she's yours as much as mine. She'll love you, ma, as she does me."

From the depths of the hooded sleigh he bundled a diminutive figure, swaddled in furs and laprobes, with two big, sparkling round eyes beaming on them and red lips curved up into an adorable smile.

Angelique was a four-year-old baby girl whom he had adopted from a war-devastated village near the front!

"Her people were all killed by the Germans," Henry explained apologetically, "so I thought I'd bring her along instead of letting her be sent to some orphanage."

Ma Barker gave a choking sort of cry and caught the baby girl for which she had prayed so long for her relieved breast. As for old John, he swallowed hard, winked broadly at the grinning Jed beside the horse, and said:

"We've got some hard cider in the house, Jed. Better come in with me and have a nip before you put the horses up. Gosh, but come to think of it, Santa Claus' presents always are supposed to be surprises anyway, aren't they, Jed?"

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